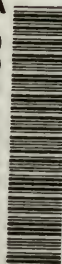


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The Centaur's Booty



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THE CENTAUR'S BOOTY
BY T. STURGE-MOORE



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THE CENTAUR'S BOOTY

[On one that stands out above a waste of boulders, the old Centaur, PHOLUS, lies gazing forth into the deepening twilight ; at last, having sighed, he speaks :]

Black my thoughts are, black the hills and mountains,
Ocean a sombre grey,
And the sky darkens.

There ! lights are there ; yea, torch-light flashes,
Travelling the wide way

Forth from yon city :

Men shake them, ah ! the crowd pursues him :

Wildly they glance and flare

By mob rage shaken ;

They stop, collect—ah, ah, an hundred !

Two ! out-numbered, there,

He must be taken.

They slay him, slay my friend, my brother ;

He bleeds there—faints there—dies—

Even now his throes are bitter.

I of centaurs am the last then ;

Why should I longer live ?

To die were fitter ;

Never shall mine eyes behold

What soothed my father's gaze when his grew old ;

Never watch young bodies that renew

The pleasant memories of mine early years

Doing now all that I then would do ;
With what zest such youth careers
Merely for the sake of speed !
They wrestle—being more and other
Than noblest man, than grandest steed—
Each one with his twofold brother.
Ah, to be last of centaurs living !
No young ones gallop on the hills ;
Nor can I bring, in hopes of giving
Due chastisement to yonder town,
With noise as when a torrent fills,
A tide of hooves that thunder down,
Wrath from the Thracian hills.—
Avert thy death I cannot,
Medon, my friend ;
Helpless, I even plan not
Thy foes to end ;
Nor will I shed a tear,
Who still have known
How vain hope would appear
When truth was known ;
We were not born to grow
And gather sway
But to a weakling foe
To yield each day ;
Since numbers and not worth

The Gods decree
Shall rule and foul the earth,
What is, must be.

[He remains silent, gazing forth into the deep night
until the sound of hooves is heard in the distance, when
he raises his head and moans.]

Oh, that mine ears had lost their hearing!

Or that my heart were strong enough

To ban new hopes! yea, they are nearing;

It cannot be a mere wild horse,

They are too steady in their fall;

A man might scarcely ride at all

On such a night, not hold his course

With constant careful purposed speed;

It is, oh! it must be, of need,

Medon, my only friend and brother.

[A VOICE rises some distance away.]

Medon am I, and no other.

PHOLUS

Hail! art thou wounded? stay thou there, I come:

Oh, clamber not upon these boulders, friend,

To jar thy wound! I shall soon be with thee.

That burden in thine arms can be no girl;

It is too small.

MEDON

No wound have I, nor have

I rapt a woman hither ; 'tis a child,
A boy.

PHOLUS

Of what use to us is a child ?

MEDON

He sleeps ; he struggled, bit, roared, howled, at length
He wept himself to sleep : behold these limbs,
Sturdy, well-knit ! . . . Would that there were more light
And thou should'st see a child as brave for health
And strength, as violent and full of passion. . . .
Despite his two legs, 'tis a centaur nature.

PHOLUS

Women sometimes bear better than they would.

MEDON

When the moon rises, those thy words will seem
Far truer than thou thinkest yet ; O Pholus,
All that thou said'st before I left thee, worked
And struggled in my brain, and when I came
Among the farms, and saw them as thou said'st. . . .
The first I saw was like a singing flower ;
As though a tall pale blossom had a voice
She in a little coppice stood for shade,
Her distaff in one hand, while with the other
She twirled the spindle slowly towards the ground
And looked up singing, like an open flower :

I saw her weakness in her beauty strong ;
And knew she loved herself, frail though she was ;
And felt she must be worse than wine to me ;
Then, far within, I heard thy words like stones
That drop down through an empty quarry's womb
Slow ring—" For vain it is that they pretend
That either gods have joy or fate ensures
To crown this virtue born of women's dreams,
This worship of the weak which they call pity :
Nothing is pitied of the gods and fate."
Oh ! as when one has swum too wide a lake
And faint, exhausted, strikes the beach at last,
With hooves that scarce may stead him—so, to me
Who had been battling with a subtler flood,
Came, like a fresh breeze to a popped dell
" Nothing is pitied of the gods and fate."
Could I have dreamed Apollo might be kind,
Or Zeus think of me, or Fate hear my prayer ;
I had not turned and fled her as I did,
I had not felt so young and glad as that.

PHOLUS

I was concerned thou shouldst so dream of women
Since that thy fair Hipponoë was dead ;
Thou leftst me very heavy when thou wentest
To snatch a woman from the lowlands yonder,
And mock thy widowed heart with human love.

MEDON

All thou hadst said went with me and was strong :
Besides, I always carry in my mind
My dead Hipponoë ;
The place I found her in,
An arrow through her neck,
Another lodged deep in her ripening womb ;
I found her, where they left her, in her blood ;
I laid the mountain goat's kid I had brought
Upon her hair ; upon her raven hair
The white new-strangled kid we should have dressed
And eaten of together ;
Both were dead ;
I buried both within a single grave :
Besides thy words,—her brown arms, the white kid
Between them laid upon her thick black hair ;
The patch of blood-stained grass
Mid the bright grass still green that grew all round :—
Besides thy words I had this vision with me,
So felt we were the last of all our race ;
If one of the two last became the slave
Of a slight blossom with a female voice,
Which by some witch-craft Circe bade to grow
In a sun-chequered woodland coppice, there
To sing until a centaur came that way
And knelt him down to worship day and night,

Letting his strength leak out at eyes and ears,
While only Pholus, saddened with old age,
Lived as the noble centaurs lived of old
And made the hills redound unto his praise!

PHOLUS

I can remember still an ancient centaur
Who by a nymph was won away from us—
Though he had had a wife, would he have fought ;
For then were many females of our race
And none, who owned his strength, need have lived lone :
But a white nymph there dwelt among the rocks,
And, while she lay before him, he would kneel
And pore upon her eyes ;
She was not as a woman who grows old,
Loses her charm and frees those whom she snared :
Nay, till he died her beauty held him fast ;
No joy he knew, no change, but, in a trance
He gazed upon her snowy languid form,
And sought he knew not what within her eyes.

MEDON

I thought of him ; for thou, long years ago,
Hadst spoken sadly of his wasted life,
And how his death was like a blasted tree's
Ragged with dead moss, whitened with crumbling tinder,
Gnarled, writhen, old, patient and desolate.
For she, she left him as the white owl quits

The old stump ere it falls ; she left him young,
Dreamy and calm as she had been before
He found her like a sleeping water there,
A mirror visited by all the stars
And which at noon-day seems a golden shield
Dropped by a Titan mid the rocks he hurled,
Or which, hurled at him, drove him wounded thence.
Some say the nymphs are women whom the gods
Have loved and given life to, ageless life,
And left each in the place where she was loved,
A memory to which they may return
And find a joy long past yet look like joy ;
Each lovely spot still cradle of the form
Whose youth and beauty caused their sojourn in it ;
The virgin they deflowered, virgin still ;
Ah ! fatal is that youth that is not young,
That purity that is no longer pure
But seems so ; ah ! how kind can beauty seem !

PHOLUS

'Tis like enough the gods are pleased with evil,
And thus pollute the beauty of the earth,
Hiding their wantonness as spring cloaks winter,—
Who false proclaims that death, decay and ruin
Exist not, while she really battens on them
In rash, triumphant lust and carelessness,—
As women heed not what courageous life
xiv.

They draw man from ; the better, the more homage
They sip, the richer flavour soaks their dream !

MEDON

It may be so with some.

PHOLUS

With most it is.

MEDON

Not many have such beauty ; if the Gods
Take some to make them nymphs, but few are left.

PHOLUS

Enough ; for it goes hard if once in life
A woman have not her brief hour of charm,
And find not some man weaker than her spell.

MEDON

The next I saw were not so fair as flowers ;
The thought of her I left within the wood
Made them seem noteless, common as their tasks ;
And then I found the mother of this child :
She might have been a centauress half hid
By plants of broom ; for shoulders, arms, and breasts
Were bare and brown ; the head was crowned with hair
As with the symbol of a mighty realm ;
All else was hidden in a yellow robe :
There sate she, doing nothing with her hands,
But quiet as Demeter in her cave ;
I moved me round till I could watch her eyes,

And then I felt my strength was like a dream,
And as a vision foreign seemed my shape,
And all that I have done like misty tales ;
Silence fell round me such as made the noon
As proper for the advent of a god
As midnight is for sudden Artemis ;
Then were thy words found voiceless, as when trees
On a still night seem hardly to be there :
Hast thought on sleep at all ?
On dreamless slumber pondered ever ?
What are we when we do not know ourselves ?
Where are we ? Is
The world about us still ?
We count it certain that the world is there ;
For we see others sleep,
And wake in the same place ;
But, oh ! how heavy on the mind it lies,
The thought of dreamless sleep !
If we will think of it,
We find no help at all,
Nor can we say one word ;
All of me slept except what gazed on her
And even so she was not like a dream.

PHOLUS

Ah ! Medon, Medon, how didst thou escape ?
For every woman is a thing of pity,

That teaches love of weakness to the strong ;
They dream of pity when their hands do naught,
And, if they smile, have thought on tenderness.

MEDON

Nay, not this woman : hers were dreamless eyes.

PHOLUS

Fool, Medon, she will lure thee back to her ;
For 'tis the nursing of a tender dream
That gives such power to a woman's glance,
Troubling so the hearts of centaurs even ;
Those girls that had this novelty of gaze,
They spread this madness through the race of men ;
For men were once as centaurs, proud of strength,
And scorned to win by numbers—men were once
Our equals and their wives wholesome as ours,
Obedient to the male and calm with health !

MEDON

This woman was as calm sea is, and hale.

PHOLUS

Ah ! Medon, strong men lied first to defend
Base weakness ; yea, for women's sake they lied ;
Their words were as our own when I was young.

MEDON

I speak as centaurs speak and not as men.

PHOLUS

Fondly thou spak'st ; thus men have come to speak :

Yet always had man half a mind to this ;
Loving beyond the circle of his peers,
And pleased to talk,
Nay, happy even to laugh
With weaklings and with slaves ;
Prizing his woman not for wholesome soundness
And power to bear him sturdy little ones,
But for a sickly grace, a languid air,
And instant exhibition of vile fear ;
Because she hath the coward's knees at once,
When even a stoat bolts in and out the hedge.

MEDON

Nay, hear me speak, good Pholus, and believe
You are too quick to find me like a man ;
I have not brought the woman back with me,
Yet, had I wished to bring her, she were here.

PHOLUS

Speak, Medon : thou wast ever amorous,
And wentest forth to rape a woman hither ;
Therefore forgive my no way groundless doubt.

MEDON

There sate the woman by her husband's door,
And I was in an orchard screened by trees.
Within the house there came a sudden cry ;
This child had hurt himself and forth he came,
The little storm, weeping and howling too,

And flung his naked body 'gainst the knees,
Ruddy and brown, against the yellow skirt
Of his calm mother ; who looked down on him ;
He stopped his howling, held pinched fingers up ;
She took and kissed them, spoke low words to him,
And soon he smiled, stood up and rubbed his eyes,
Then gazed all round. His black and curly head,
The steadiness he had upon his legs,
His pouts that came to nothing in a smile,
And every part of him already male,
Forceful and eager, filled my mind with ease.

The centaur colt is beautiful and strange
Beside its mother, gazing from a cave ;
Wondering that earth so fair is ;
Asking the name of trees,
Of sun and moon and hill ;
Hearing to-day, as for the first time still,
The answer that she made him yesterday :
—To see him stand admiring width of space
And its soft-filling bath of light and air,
Smiling at evening's silence or the noon's,
Then, thinking that he hears a distant bird,
Half reeling with delight,
Impassioned for that voice of simple joy
Whose easy triumph over sweetest words

Makes him afraid his mother hears it not,
(Although he sees she hears)
Because she is less shaken than himself,
Less new to pleasure,
Less ignorant of pain ;
To see him fills pubescent youth with glee
Almost as uncontainable as his,
Almost as novel, as ignorant almost,
Which makes him seek the youthful virgin out ;
Which, when he finds her, makes her meek to him,
Not as before, suspicious and aloof.
O Pholus, thus I found Hipponoë ;
Yet every promise that had filled my mind
Was butchered when she met her cruel death.

PHOLUS

If weakness always had
The promise of a colt,
Then, then, indeed,
Man's worship of it were not quite insane.
But this, oh, this ! is truth,
That nowhere else it seems to promise even,
And only seems in youth ;
The promise of a colt lies in his strength,
So of a virgin in her strength it lies,
Though both indeed are weak ;
Yea, man's thought is confused

And not our thought, who see
Thus much alone of good ;
Betwixt a vile beginning and vile end,
Welcome to contemplation of the mind,
We, centaurs, clearly see a few years' span
Wherein thought may be pleased,
Purpose effective more or less,
Our bodies strong, our enemies afraid—
A few years thus we see, but even they
Do dodge calamities and end
In loss of strength ; and worse,
More bitter yet than loss of strength, in loss
Of all significance.
It is not good that, though the earth be fair,
Our strength is so entangled and hemmed in ;
Gratitude is not due
For gifts so given that they mock themselves :
Wisely we judge of gods,
Wisely we judge of fate,
Who look for nothing that we cannot take,
Expecting loss of all we cannot keep,
And know our strength will often not suffice,
And know that we shall end in wretchedness ;
Yet, while strength lasts, on what it may acquire
Expend it, and rejoice that so much is
As we would have it be.

MEDON

How this child sleeps !

In silence like the future's where our dreams

Wander and yet find naught but what they bring !

The room of all expectancy is here !

Thus spread the landscape in the happy eyes

Of loved Hipponoë !

Ah ! here,

As in an eagle's egg,

Enjoyment of the empire of the air,

Is lodged a prophecy, a thing to be :

Behold, the moon doth rise ;

Her light, see, steals

Across the lichened surface of this slab ;

It reaches now his little foot, behold !

What roads, what sea-shores, and what craggy heights,

Softly and firmly planted, shall this tread

And carry with it all our will's success ;—

Or else, the mere frustration of our love

It shall proceed with over marble floors,

Or where those women with the crafty eyes,

Pacing soft carpets in their curtained bowers,

Bewitch the strength that might have made a man

The centaur's brother.

PHOLUS

O Medon, what is in this child that you

xxii.

Without replying to my words of weight,
Dote so upon its feebleness ?
We cannot rear it,
There is no hope we could ;
Any of all the paking evils that beset
A weanling must suffice
To quite frustrate our best of care.

MEDON

Ah ! Pholus, thou art old and slow to hope ;
Yet hope, while we have strength for it, is good.
What though the day draw near
When I shall be as tardy as thyself
To please my mind with happiness not felt,
But fancied on the wing and longed for, longed for !
This night is now all lovely with the moon,
And, must to-morrow night be drenched in rain,
Yet we indulge our eyes with this delight
And so far banish every thought of storm
That tempest seems a thing impossible,
And even the clouds which erewhile clad the earth
Are hard to think of ; hard to think of, Pholus,
While moonlight softens all the stars
And drapes the innocent and delicate charm
Of sleeping infancy o'er rough stern hills
And lights the salt sea up with such a smile
As comes upon the features of a child

When in his dreams he sees a butterfly
Float gorgeous down and nearly within reach.

PHOLUS

Ah ! yes ;

The bitterest thought that we are doomed to think
Is that our joys were always groundless, always !—
And more of wisdom, more of knowledge, more
Of self-control, of power would have turned
Those hours, the only sweet ones we have known,
To indignation or perhaps despair.

MEDON

Oh ! then, I thank my weakness ; even I
Find weakness helpful as a woman does :
Yet think that I am stronger than thyself.

PHOLUS

Ah ! for the moment stronger ; but such strength
Carries within it such a grief as mine,
And thou dost know it surely even as I.

MEDON

Hug thy wisdom, but hark : the child is here
And I who love him stronger am than thou :
Proud of the hope that's mine, I say, do this,
Help me rear up the child—and oh ! assume,
Even if thou canst not feel, some cheerfulness,
Or I will leave thee and, with the babe alone,
Live out my active term how brief soe'er.

xxiv.

PHOLUS

Yea, be a fool while thou hast strength for folly
And force my wisdom serve thy wantonness,
Thou wilt but prove my bitterest thought most true.

MEDON

Enough, old grumbler ; ha ! thou mak'st me feel
Almost as I felt towards this youngster's dam,
When he did clamber on her knee and tried
To seize her breast with hungry eagerness :
She pushed him so that he slipped from her lap
And, when he climbed again, she pushed again ;
At first, he only laughed at each rebuff,
But soon vexation changed the note of it ;
Ere long like crested wave he raged and mounted ;
She, with provoking strength, lazy contempt,
Baffled his wrath as easily as when
His first assaults had been half sapped by laughing.
It was her will to wean him, doubtless ; yea,
As it is thine to minish now my joy,
Because it doth surpass the bounds prescribed
To thine old age. Her breast was rich enough ;
And thou hast strength sufficient for much joy,
Though not such great joys as are mine, may be.
Why did she envy him the milk he craved ?
She knew no more than all thy wisdom knows
Why thou dost strive to check and thwart my hopes

Since thou admitt'st them necessary, ha?
Nay, she had more of reason, since, ere long
She would have had, or may be had, another
Whose need of milk was greater than his was :
Though for her sleek contempt of his fine rage
There can be no excuse. He left her there,
As I will leave thee if thou so persist,
And with his little arms before his eyes,
And shaken with the fury he was in,
Staggered towards the orchard and towards me
Who guessed her will, as cold to my desire
As unto his ; content too ripe in her
To let her feel for those the edge of nature
Makes wild with hunger, angry with desire.
I seized the child ; perchance
She fathoms want by now ;
By now she paces bleak desire's den.
The music of her first alarum shrieks
Inspirited my career ;
It made me blind ; I took the wrong highway ;
And well-nigh was I in the town before
I knew the road mistaken, nor could re-find,
But made bad worse ; for soon the hunt was up ;
Thou sawest their torches as the evening fell ;
I think thou must have seen them even from here.

PHOLUS

I did, and will be pleasant to thee, Medon,
And nurse thy joys ; for thou didst very well :
That women should be proud, who reign by pity,
To the sole beings they have the power to scorn—
Their children and their lovers—that they should
Makes all my blood boil in me ; let them learn
To acquiesce in all things to the male.

MEDON

Ha, ha ! the centaur glee shall rouse the hills
And turn their echoes giddy yet awhile,
Since Pholus joins with me and shares my joy
And is a centaur still, despite old age !
Come, revel in thy strength ; adore that fleetness,
Made musical with hooves, that leaves the man—
Even the man on horseback as a wave
Is left all angry, toiling after blasts
That sweep the ocean with tremendous glee !

PHOLUS

I will ; I will ! my youth resurges now,
And shall employ unto the latest pulse
Life as the centaurs have determined wise ;
Not in a vain regret that things are ill,
But exultation that good strength is mine.

MEDON

The nights are short, and, hard upon the moon,

The sun will rise ; yea, half the light in heaven
Is his already.

Ha ! the youngster wakes—

Ho ! you rogue, my booty ;

Laugh, little giant !

Shake thou thy stout limbs

Like a god's baby ;

Be careless and laugh !

[The CHILD, whom he has tickled, crows.]

MEDON

Ha, ha !

Crow thou thy heartful !

Catch him, old Pholus.

Safe as a bird has he flown to thine arms.

PHOLUS

Ho ! he's so warm and so soft ;

He clings to my beard like an ant ;

His eyes are like birds

Quick peeping betwixt the tall stalks of the corn ;

He shakes with delight ;

He loves me already.—

Come, call me grand-daddy, come call me grand-dad.

CHILD

Grand-daddy and dad.

MEDON

He has called me his dad ;

xxviii.

Toss him back to these arms.
Like a bird through the air, he is caught !
Oh ! he shall run naked
Till hairs on him grow,
And he shall climb mountains
And trample their snow
Till hooves on him grow !
Till hooves on him grow !

PHOLUS

Back with him ! back to the arms
Of grand-daddy ! the rogue,
He has come ; has he come to his nest ?
He shall feed on the best ;
Here are berries, blue berries as soft
As the nipple that nourished him erst.
I squeeze the soft pulp through his lips ;
He has eaten from my hand the first ;
And therefore I hold him aloft ;
Both my hands make a chair for his hips ;
Such a chair, in the prow of men's ships,
Carries rovers above the loud billows ;
So, through this copse of stunt willows,
My furrow I cleave with my lord.

MEDON

Nay, Pholus, to me give him now ;
For I can go faster than thou ;

And he should be borne in the van ;
Make a throne for his hips with my one hand I can !
See, now, he sits on the palm and the while
My fingers support him behind, and my thumb
He grasps with his left hand.—Yea, smile ;
For the sun, from his bed that doth come,
Makes thee golden of all things the first.
Above the hill's top I lift thee so high
That I make thee the one golden cloud in the sky !

PHOLUS

Shake thou thy little right fist at Apollo,
The God that is proud to be flattered by man ;
For thou art the first that shall say :
“ Though thou give me the day
Not to thee will I bow, no, nor can
Thine anger turn fate from the path she doth follow ;
'Tis thy function to shine,
'Tis thy life, as to revel is mine ! ”

MEDON

Yea, he shall have sons
And make much of his life ;
The hills shall be his.

PHOLUS

Down like a torrent he runs
And bears off a wife ;
His hands shall she kiss

xxx.

And be humble to him
And humour his whim ;
She shall grow healthy and strong,
And her hair shall be long ;
He shall strip from her all other dress,
Then the ease of her nakedness
She shall learn from her lord :
And her daughters, no more than wild mares,
Dream their beauty a thing they may hoard,
Nor consider their bodies as snares
Engines baited with shame and with pleasure
In equal measure.

MEDON

No, no, for they shall be glad
With simplicity clad,
Not conceiving that woven a cloth is
More fine or more soft than their skin !
Or that tint on the pinion of moth is
Which they could look lovelier in
Than the brown and the flush of their health !
Or that any other wealth
Could honour them more than children glowing ;
The red delight within them flowing !

PHOLUS (holding up the child towards the sun)
See, see, thou king of the year !
Look ! what a father is here

For the years to come !
This child is a male, dost thou see ?

MEDON

Apollo, hast thou no fear
That thine oracle might be dumb
For all the use it will be,
When a race from this child sprung,
Has conquered and cleansed all lands,
So that nowhere a temple stands
And to pray there is no skilled tongue ?

PHOLUS

Give, give him to me once more ;
For here I have found a comb,
Its juice has so sweetened my thumb
That naught he has sucked at before
Was ever so much to his mind,
Nor any one else so kind
As Pholus, his gnarled grandsire.

MEDON

Come, climb with him higher and higher !

PHOLUS

I will wrap the whole comb in green leaves ;
For I have nursed children before
And remember how hungry they were.
Ah ! my heart is still angry and grieves
For the colts that Breemoosa bore,

xxxii.

That were slain while they clung to her.

MEDON

He shall avenge them, and thee

That wouldst not have been barren to me

My espoused, my Hipponoë.

PHOLUS

Yea, he shall avenge all our race ;

The grandchildren of those who slew them

His children shall slay ;

Though for pity they seek in his face,

His arrows shall drive right through them

And he not know why they pray.

MEDON

He shall milk the wild goats on the mountains ;

His feet shall grow sure as their feet ;

He shall bathe in the clear rock fountains,

Till so clear is his mind and so deep ;

And his joy shall be high as the snow-line

And embrace a vast plain with delight ;

His laugh shall twang true as a bow-line,

Like arrows his songs take their flight.

PHOLUS

And none who were pupils of Cheiron

Were ever so strong or so wise,

Nor ever their eyes glowed with fire on

Battle's eve as our rage in his eyes

Shall glow without hindrance of pity,
Shall burn without let from remorse,
As havoc from city to city
He hounds on his destinied course.

MEDON

But first, in high valleys,
When June is in blow,
He shall sleep and run naked
Till hairs on him grow !
Or in the hale winter
Shall powder their snow
Till hooves on him grow !
Till hooves on him grow !

[Winding up the valleys and across the ridges, ever deeper and higher they travel into the heart of the range, by turns carrying the child and arousing the echoes.]

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